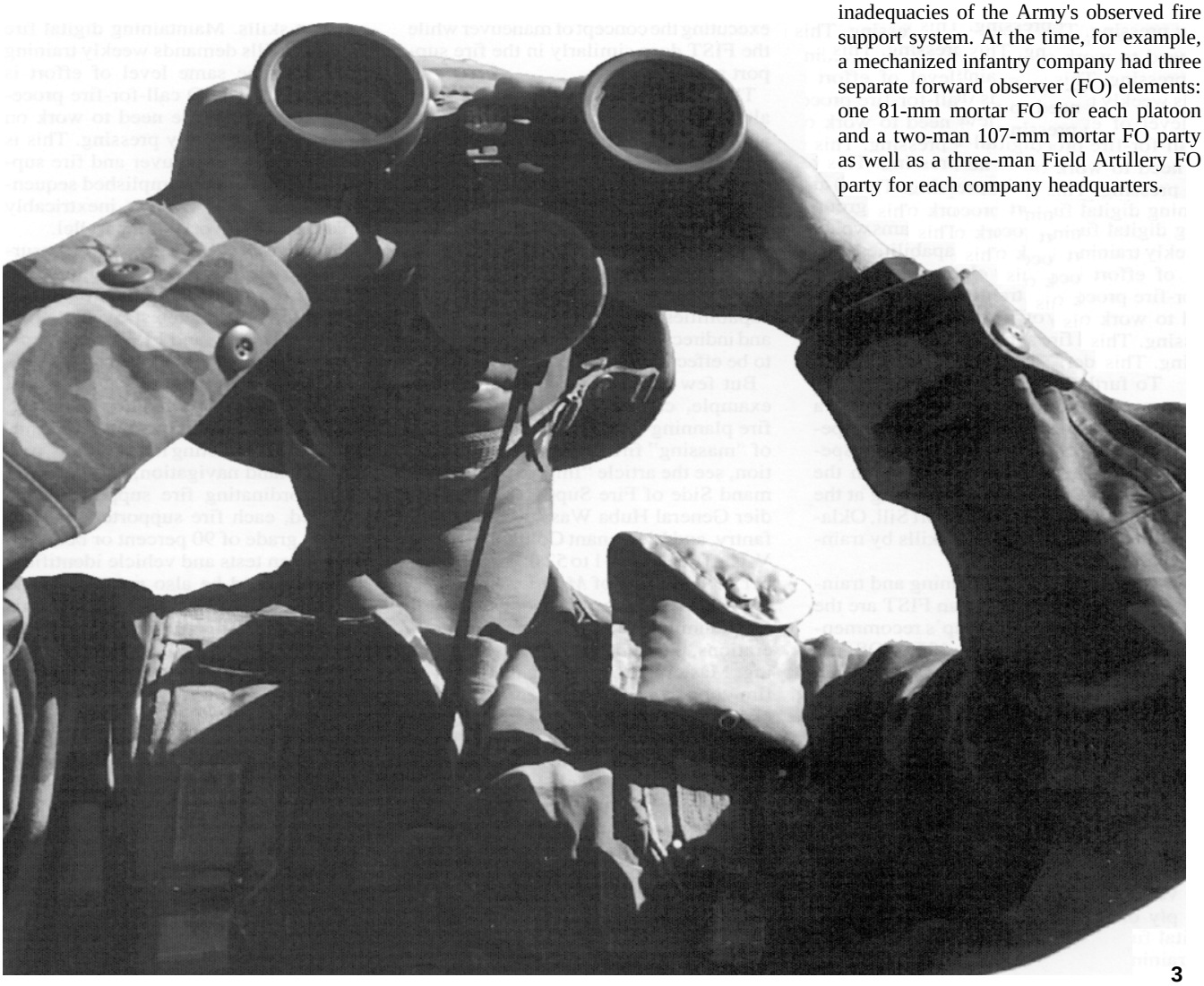
Why We Need FISTs—
Never Send a Man When You Can Send a Bullet

by Colonel David H. Petraeus, IN; Major Damian P. Carr; and Captain John C. Abercrombie

"Never send a man when you can send a bullet." Sam Colt said that, and he was right. The fire support team (FIST) is the key to making sure the big bullets sent are accurate, timely and the right type.



This article is the product of discussions about FISTs with the 1st Brigade's artillery battalion commander, fire support officers (FSOs) and several others in the maneuver and fire support communities of the 82d Airborne Division at Fort Bragg, North Carolina. We concluded that the expertise and capabilities FISTs provide maneuver companies are critical and that FISTs contribute enormously to success in the close fight. But before discussing FIST expertise and capabilities, we offer some background on how the FIST concept evolved.

Evolution of the FIST. The FIST concept had its beginning in the mid-1970s during the height of the Cold War. In 1975, the Commandant of the US Army Field Artillery School, Major General David E. Ott, wrote to General William E. Depuy, the Commanding General of the newly formed Training and Doctrine Command (TRADOC), expressing his concerns about the inadequacies of the Army's observed fire support system. At the time, for example, a mechanized infantry company had three separate forward observer (FO) elements: one 81-mm mortar FO for each platoon and a two-man 107-mm mortar FO party as well as a three-man Field Artillery FO party for each company headquarters.

C Company FIST, 3d Battalion, 504th Parachute Infantry Regiment, represents the ten-man infantry company FIST with its equipment: PLGRs, MELIOS, binoculars and single-channel ground and airborne radio system (SINCGARS). The first row shows the three forward observer parties, alternating from left to right are the forward observers and radio telephone operators. The second row contains the FIST headquarters element, consisting of the company FSO, company FSNCO, fire support specialist and radio telephone operator.

General Ott observed that by the nature of the organization, the company commander often was unable to coordinate the activities of the artillery and mortar observers. General Depuy agreed and charged the first Close Support Study Group to "optimize observed fire support for maneuver forces on the modern battlefield."

The solution proposed by the study group was a fire support team (FIST) at the company level. The study group presented the case that these teams would improve the technical capabilities provided to maneuver elements, enhance combined arms training and provide a Field Artillery officer to coordinate company-level fire support for the company commander.

To further ensure the success of this concept, the study group proposed a new enlisted military occupational specialty (MOS) of 13F Fire Support Specialist. The new 13Fs would gain the requisite skills in formal training at the Field Artillery School at Fort Sill, Oklahoma, and sustain those skills by training in their units.

The organization, manning and training of the current 10-man FIST are the results of the study group's recommendations. That structure, 13F MOS and institutional and unit training remain the cornerstones of fire support expertise in today's FISTs.

What, then, do FISTs bring to the combined arms fight? We believe the answers can be grouped into two areas: expertise and capabilities.

FIST Expertise. As foreseen more than two decades ago, today's FISTs provide expertise that enables maneuver unit leaders to fully exploit the panoply of fire support assets available to them. FISTs allow company commanders and platoon leaders to focus their attention and efforts on developing and executing the concept of maneuver while the FIST does similarly in the fire support arena.

This division of labor works well, for although most company commanders and platoon leaders understand the importance of fire support, few have the depth of knowledge needed to plan, coordinate and execute a fire support plan. Now, having said all that, we hasten to add that the integration of fires is a command responsibility, and maneuver leaders must at least understand the capabilities and limitations of the direct and indirect fire systems supporting them to be effective combined arms leaders.

But few maneuver commanders, for example, can explain how top-down fire planning works or the significance of "massing" fires. (For more information, see the article "Improving the Demand Side of Fire Support" by Brigadier General Huba Wass de Czege, Infantry, and Lieutenant Colonel Michael V. Cuff on Pages 51 to 52 of the November 1993 edition of *Military Review*.)

While the division of labor works well for planning and executing combat operations, the same is also true for training. Mastering the technical aspects of fire support requires a degree of specialized training that can't be provided to every maneuver officer attending a branch school. The Officer Basic Course at the Infantry School, Fort Benning, Georgia, for example, has a total of 888 hours of instruction; however, only 21 hours (two-and-a-half percent) are fire support-oriented. The amount is even less in the Officer Basic Course at the Armor School, Fort Knox, Kentucky, during which only 14 hours are dedicated to fire support training. These observations are not meant as criticism; rather, they reflect a simple fact—our schoolhouses can't train everyone to be an expert in everything.

Even if the maneuver branch schools could provide in-depth fire support instruction to the degree provided Field Artillery officers and 13F MOS soldiers (as is done for the handful of maneuver officers who attend the Field Artillery Officer Advanced Course at Fort Sill), most maneuver leaders undoubtedly would find it difficult to sustain that fire support expertise. The need to focus on maneuver tasks and resource limitations (most notably time) make maintaining perishable fire support expertise difficult, at best.

Even Field Artillery units struggle to achieve and sustain proficiency in fire support skills. Maintaining digital fire support skills demands weekly training sessions. The same level of effort is needed to keep FO call-for-fire procedures sharp, and the need to work on other tasks is equally pressing. This is not to say that maneuver and fire support training are accomplished sequentially; rather, the two are inextricably linked and are worked in parallel.

The focus of FIST training is on ensuring expertise in "go-to-war" duties. The 82d Airborne Division's program is comprised of written tests, vehicle recognition training and FIST minimums. The latter encompass those critical tasks that fire support personnel at each level must perform to standard, including establishing and maintaining communications, conducting fire missions, performing land navigation, and planning and coordinating fire support. To be certified, each fire supporter must receive a grade of 90 percent or better on the written tests and vehicle identification exam and he also must complete the other fire support minimums for his duty position. This program—which has high visibility in the 82d—ensures that FISTs are well trained when they link up with their maneuver platoons and companies for training or contingency operations.

The company FIST and maneuver units come together in training to integrate fire support into platoon and company operations. The FIST concept that aligns an FO party with every platoon and an FSO with every company headquarters makes integrating artillery and mortar fires into training events relatively easy.

The FIST serves as a constant reminder of the importance of and need for fire support.

In addition, the close relationship between the FISTs and the units they habitually support helps with coordination of indirect fire support assets for training and ensures FSOs and fire support NCOs (FSNCOs) participate in company training meetings where they quickly can address questions about fire support.

FIST Capabilities. Closely related to fire support expertise, the FIST also brings special equipment and other capabilities that help accomplish battlefield tasks. These allow the FIST to plan fire support concurrently with the development of the maneuver plan and employ special fire support systems and munitions. Another significant FIST contribution is, of course, redundant communications when the maneuver unit has difficulty communicating on its command net.

Concurrent Planning. A common challenge at the combat training centers (CTCs) and in recent contingencies is the limited time available to plan, coordinate, integrate, synchronize and rehearse the activities of the various "combat multipliers" before the execution of a mission. Parallel planning—the concurrent development of the plans for each combat, combat support and combat service support asset available to support the maneuver concept—has repeatedly proven to be key to mission accomplishment.

FISTs provide company commanders the capability to conduct parallel planning in the fire support area. First, the FSO coordinates to determine the availability of fire support assets. Next, and based on his commander's fire support guidance, he integrates those assets into the overall plan in support of the maneuver concept. Then he ensures planned fires are synchronized with maneuver through fire support and combined arms rehearsals. Finally, his FOs refine the targets and he updates them on the fire support plan. FIST digital communications and automated fire support systems greatly expedites the target refining process.

Special Equipment. FISTs have special items of enormous value for planning and executing tactical operations. These include the ground/vehicular laser locator designator (G/VLLDs) usually mounted on tracked or wheeled vehicles (pending funding, the lightweight laser designator rangefinder, or LLDR, will replace the G/VLLD at the turn of the century); the AN/PVS-6 mini eye-safe laser, infrared observation set (MELIOS), which is a hand-held laser rangefinder (and now has an azimuth indicator as well); and the hand-held precision lightweight global positioning system (GPS) receiver (PLGR). These items allow a FIST member to pinpoint his location, precisely determine the ranges to and location of his target and illuminate that target with lasers for attack by helicopters, close air support aircraft or precision artillery munitions, such as Copperhead.

The advent of digital communications equipment, such as the forward entry device (FED), also has helped the entire fire support process, streamlining fire planning and execution. In the planning phase, for example, targets developed to support an overall brigade defensive plan are distributed to FISTs digitally. The FISTs then accurately locate the targets on the ground (often registering defensive targets and adjusting such aspects as the sheaf), add additional targets and the data for them and help refine other aspects of the fire support plan. This information is sped back through digital channels for inclusion in the brigade plan. (The FED will be replaced by the lighter weight hand-held terminal unit, or HTU, which expands the FO's capabilities with other digital devices, starting in early FY 1998.)

Additionally, although units still typically plan digitally and execute using voice communications, Army XXI tests are demonstrating the dramatic value of digital communications for execution as well. In such cases, digital "comms" greatly reduce the time required to clear fire missions and send them to fire direction centers (FDCs). Digital communications also eliminate some of the errors associated with voice communications and reduce the possibility of fratricide. When coupled with position locating systems and precision range-finders, digital communications significantly increase the likelihood of swift first-round effects on targets.

Moreover, digitally equipped FISTs are the first link in an information chain that can extend to the corps level and above. Reports sent digitally by FISTs can be collected and analyzed by higher level fire support elements (FSEs) and used to help paint the overall picture of developments on the battlefield, thereby, providing commanders at all levels greater situational awareness.

Redundancy in Communications. Finally, the voice and digital communications capabilities of FISTs can be valuable to platoon leaders and company commanders when command communications nets go down, are jammed or are overloaded by transmissions. In such cases, leaders have turned to their FOs or FIST radio operators for years and used fire support nets until command nets are restored. Beyond that, the traffic on fire support nets on element locations and activities often provides useful information to company commanders and platoon leaders.

Sam Colt's admonition to "send bullets" instead of men applies today. And FISTs provide the expertise and capabilities to get those big bullets where we need them most.

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